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ABSTRACT

Despite numerous studies on educators' upward mobility and a plethora of administrator selection criteria, little research has been done on the process of moving from teaching positions to the principalship. Administrators are not always chosen fairly; sometimes they are preselected before the final interview--even when an elaborate selection process seems to have been followed. If preselection does occur frequently and success determinants are part of a hidden agenda, then applicants need to focus their efforts in these alternative arenas. This study tries to identify the actual determinants of career mobility for individuals who eventually become elementary school principals. Superintendents and principals of 20 county systems and 14 city systems in Tennessee were interviewed and their responses sorted into theme categories. Results showed that applicants were more likely to be selected if they (1) had worked within the school system and had an excellent record and peer respect; (2) had a charismatic personality, common sense, and a professional dress style; (3) knew the school system and its administrative procedures; (4) had a broad curriculum background; (5) would support the superintendent and handle parental complaints effectively; (6) took on added responsibilities without complaint or remuneration; (7) possessed excellent communication skills; (8) had a variety of leadership experiences; and (9) appeared to fit into the system. (MLH)

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UPWARD MOBILITY DETERMINANTS FOR THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALSHIP

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of this study was to identify determinants of upward mobility for individuals who subsequently achieve elementary principalships.

RATIONALE

Many educators aspire to elementary principalships. Awareness of tangible and nontangible determinants by aspirants can help in the upward movement toward the principalship. There have been several studies concerned with upward mobility of educational personnel toward the principalship, but there appears to be a gap in research related to the actual steps involved in moving from teaching positions to the principalship. There are, however, long lists of criteria and procedures for principal selection, yet how an individual is actually selected is not readily apparent.

Very often the method by which individuals are chosen for administrative positions appears to be a highly visible selection process yet at other times the process seems less clear. Other research reports that very often the superintendent and/or board have made up their minds prior to the final interview. Other research reports that what can look like a pretty elaborate selection procedure on paper, can still just be a smoke screen to make it appear that the best person has been picked. If preselection does occur very frequently and the actual determinants are some part of a hidden agenda, then, to compete successfully,

applicants need to additionally focus their efforts in these alternate arenas.

PROCEDURES

Instruments

For the purpose of data collection, two interview instruments were developed, one for the superintendent who recommended/hired principals, and one for the elementary principals who had been appointed/elected. The items constructed for the instruments were created to elicit responses from the individual superintendents or principals self report of the selection process. The questions were of a general lead-in style prepared for the purpose of identifying the interviewee's self report of the selection process. This open-ended question format was designed to encourage in-depth response about the selection of elementary principals. Interviews made it possible for the subject to organize their own descriptors, emphasizing what they themselves found important.

Sample

A purposive sample was drawn to maximize optimal returns. The individuals within the sample were those with certain kinds of expertise and with access to certain desired information.

The researcher focused on two populations of administrative personnel--superintendents who have recommended/hired principals and elementary principals who

have been appointed/elected to positions within these school systems. The sample was composed of twenty-one school superintendents who had recommended/hired an elementary principal in the last three school years and of thirty-three elementary principals that had been appointed/elected.

The selection procedure was based on the strata of personnel identified (superintendents and principals) and the geographic area identified by the researcher. Superintendents in the First and East School Districts of Tennessee and elementary principals hired in the last three years were sampled.

Data Collection and Analysis

The school systems identified for the study were the First and East Districts of Tennessee which consist of twenty-four (24) county systems and fifteen (15) city systems. The researcher chose not to interview in her school system, bringing the number of city systems to fourteen (14). Letters of introduction and return post cards were mailed to thirty-eight (38) superintendents in the First and East Districts. Superintendents were asked to list elementary principals they had recommended/hired in the last three years. A total of twenty (20) out of twenty-four (24) county superintendents responded. Superintendents from three counties had not hired elementary principals in the last three years. Of the remaining seventeen (17) who responded, fifteen (15) were actually interviewed.

City superintendents responding to the study totaled thirteen (13) out of a possible fourteen (14). Six superintendents had not recommended/hired elementary principals in the last three years. One superintendent was new to the system and had not hired an elementary principal, so was ineligible to participate in the study. Of the remaining six (6) superintendents, five (5) were interviewed.

The principals' sample was determined from the listings of recommended/hired elementary principals supplied by the participating sample of superintendents. Forty-four elementary principals were identified by superintendents as having been appointed/elected in the last three years. The identified elementary principals were contacted by telephone to request their participation and to set up interviews. Thirty-three elementary principals agreed to be interviewed by the researcher.

The researcher traveled to different areas in the First and East Districts of Tennessee to interview superintendents and elementary principals. The researcher began each interview with casual conversation, assurances of confidentiality, and background information about herself and the study. The researcher took notes if the interviewee agreed to such, otherwise the researcher recorded data immediately following the interview.

Completed interview records were analyzed by classifying and categorizing key concepts/words. The researcher sorted interview data into theme groups or categories. Two

independent auditors reviewed the entire process. Data were reported in summary format by question and level of respondent. A systhesis of tables with commonalities was presented as further analysis.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Findings of this study reveal that aspirants are selected to an elementary principalship due to recurring phenomena as stated by superintendents and principals:

1. Applicants were selected more often that had worked within the school system, had an excellent professional record, and held the obvious respect of peers.
2. Applicants were selected more often if they had a charismatic personality, demonstrated commonsense during interviews, and dressed professionally.
3. Applicants were selected more often if they had a strong knowledge of the school system in which they applied and were able to answer questions on school administration readily.
4. Applicants with a broad background in curriculum are more likely to be selected to an elementary principalship.
5. Applicants were selected who would show loyalty and support to the superintendent, and also handle parental complaints effectively.

6. Applicants who were involved in extra duties and took added responsibilities without complaint or monetary support were more likely to be selected.
7. Applicants with excellent communication skills are more likely to be selected.
8. Applicants who held leadership positions in a variety of ways, school or community, were more likely to be selected.
9. Applicants were more likely to be selected if the superintendent held the personal opinion that they would "fit" into the system.

SUMMARY

The identified determinants have contributed to the research base informing and assisting aspiring administrators to plan their promotion strategy during teaching years. This study has clarified the roles aspiring educators need to follow in order to place themselves in an enhanced position to be selected over other applicants. The specific knowledge of upward mobility determinants is of immense value to teachers who aspire to administrative ranks because it would help them be aware of, and actively exhibit, the characteristics which employers are likely to perceive as most important for the principalship.